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THE AJIT GHOSE COLLECTION

OF

OLD INDIAN PAINTINGS.

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THE AJIT GHOSE COLLECTION OF OLD INDIAN PAINTINGS.

BY

RAMES BASU, M. A.

The publication of Havell's "Indian Sculpture and Painting" was a memorable event in the history of Oriental art, for this pioneer work revolutionised the prevailing ideas regarding old Indian art and led to the ultimate recognition of that art by art critics and to a small extent by art-collectors. The enthusiasm of Mr. Havell, not less than the beautiful reproductions which were such a feature of his book, made a great impression on Mr. A. Ghose, whose collection of rare old Indian paintings we propose to describe briefly. He was then already a constant buyer of books, and, while turning over a catalogue of a London bookseller, he lighted on an item described as "Nine Old Indian Drawings", for which he at once sent an order. When the parcel arrived he was agreeably surprised to see written in a foreign hand on the backs of some of the pictures such inscriptions as 'Achbur', 'Hamong' &c., and on looking at the pictures he found that seven of the unidentified Indian drawings were in reality fine old Mughal portraits of the Badshahs, while the other two were Rajput paintings of Radha and Krishna. From this lucky chance began that collection which, being continually added to from year to year for twenty-five years, is now recognised by eminent authorities as one of the largest and most valuable collections of rare old Indian paintings, while as regard its representative character it is unrivalled.

Mr. Ghose's enthusiasm is boundless and he has explored all sorts of likely and unlikely places throughout the country in the fascinating search for old paintings and manuscripts and has met with many adventures. Often he has been disappointed on a first visit to a locality where he had expected something, but his instinct has led him to return again and perhaps a third and a fourth time to the self-same spot and he has found that his perseverance has finally been rewarded. His guiding principle has been to secure those

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specimens only which have a distinctive value for the study and enjoyment of old Indian art and such objects always make an instantaneous impression on his mind. He has to his credit the discovery of more numerous and more rare paintings from seemingly exhausted find-spots. Thus a very well-known authority once remarked to him that, when he visited a certain hill district a dozen years back, he came away with the impression that he had made a clean haul of everything that was to be had there ; but Mr. Ghose made extraordinarily remarkable finds in the very same locality years after. Amongst his discoveries of great importance are some old fresco paintings in the finest Kangra style which had been unnoticed so far.

In the work of collecting, Mr. Ajit Ghose has received the enthusiastic support of his elder brother, Mr. A. Ghose, F. C. S., F. G. S., M. I. M. E., who is himself one of the foremost collectors of old Indian art and has specialised more particularly in the art of old Kangra and of ancient Tibet.

The Ghose Collection is too extensive to be at all adequately dealt with in the all too brief space of a single article, and so we propose to give only a short account of it in a quite non-technical way.

The examples of Jaina art comprise very early manuscripts of the "Kalpasutra" and "Kalakacharya Kathanakam" and other works, besides fine old painted Jain book covers. One of the fifteenth century manuscripts, a dated "Kalpasutra", is one of the earliest known illustrated manuscripts on paper. A miniature from this rare work is reproduced.

The specimens of Mughal art, especially of historical portraiture, which were lent by Mr. Ghose to the Historical Section of the Calcutta Exhibition of 1923, aroused considerable interest. Visitors to the annual conferences of the Indian Historical Records Commission have also had opportunities of admiring some of the unique examples in the collection which have been loaned by special request. They are of far greater artistic and historical importance than the ordinary variety of exhibition pictures. A number of paintings in the Ghose Collection have come from the Imperial collections of the Mughal Emperors and bear the seals of the Badshahs, such as Aurangzebe, Shah Alum and Faruksiyar. Of unique interest is a picture of Riziyah Sultana by Ram, Court painter of Akbar, which belonged to Zebunnissa Begum, sweet poetess and daughter of Aurangzebe, and her seal is the mute witness of her ownership.

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In this section there are signed examples of the work of Ram, Chatarman or Chitarman, Balchand, Mohan and Nanha among others.

The Rajput paintings include some of the finest works of each school. Primitive Rajput painting is represented by the earliest known Ragini pictures, The Pahari Schools are represented by numerous examples, including remarkable specimens of the Siege of Lanka series. Kangra paintings are known to most people by reproductions of late Kangra examples and few have had the opportunity of admiring the strength and beauty of colouring and the unenervated draughtsmanship of early Kangra art, fine examples of which are in the Ghose Collection. It is well known that the Rajput and Pahari artists were employed by the ruling princes, and very often they were set to illustrate some popular epic or romance by a series of detached paintings. These serials are, therefore, of special importance. Mr. Ghose has been fortunate enough to have secured several such series, which are not to be found in any other collection except that of Dr. Coomaraswamy, the foremost authority on Rajput art. Among serials in the collection may be mentioned the Siege of Lanka series, primitive Rajput Raginis, Nala and Damayanti, and Gita-Govinda. After carefully going through the Rajput section of the collection, we do feel with Mr. Ghose that the old classification of Indian Schools of Painting requires revision. There are styles of painting belonging to distinct schools which merit separate recognition, but have hitherto been grouped together under the generic name of Pahari. One such school which produced a great many fine works in quite a distinctive style and is of great importance in the history of the Pahari Schools may be called the Basohli School from the centre where it flourished. Mr. Ghose is the possessor of several extraordinary primitives of this school which strongly suggest its origin from fresco painting. He has also a remarkable series of illustrations of the Gita-Govinda with the slokas on the back ; these paintings are the products of the school in its maturity. Another school —that of Chamba—produced a distinct style of portraiture, examples of which are in the collection.

Mention has already been made of the illustrated Jaina manuscripts in the collection. Among illuminated Hindu manuscripts are the romance of Hir and Ranja with many miniatures of the Rajput school and a very old manuscript of lyrics on the loves of Radha and Krishna with illustrations of the Pahari School ; but most important of all is a unique illustrated Nayika manuscript with numerous illustrations of unusual beauty apparently by an early Kangra artist.

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Of great interest is the splendid collection of fine drawings numbering several hundreds. Drawing as an art was much in vogue in mediæval India and Indian master artists may fairly be said to have attained perfection of workmanship in the line. With what boldness and simplicity is the line drawn ! Drawings of the Mughal, Rajput, Kangra, Sikh and old Bengal schools are in the Collection. The traditional skill of the Hindu artist in the manipulation of the line is nowhere better seen than in old Rajput drawings, which are hardly inferior to the best Mughal work, while they have a feeling about them which is lacking in Mughal art. The value of the line is best brought out in portraiture and we shall see how the old painters of Bengal, who are now forgotten, excelled in figure drawing.

We may add a note here as to the general method of duplicating pictures used by both Mughal and Rajput artists. Tracing paper was unknown and the lines of the drawing were marked out by means of needle-pricks. It was then lightly brushed over with powdered charcoal and the dots produced on the paper below were immediately filled in and the outline of the copy completed. Examples of these original drawings which have been pinpricked are in the Collection and drawings in every stage of completion are to be found. Often the master has left indications for his pupils, engaged in copying a work, of the pigments to be employed by little touches of colour.

Examples of Kangra drawings are perhaps even more rare than Kangra paintings ; but the Collection possesses a large number. One series depicting the seasons deserves special mention, not only on account of the individuality of the drawing, but because the portrait of one of the Kangra chiefs, Raja Gowardhandas appears as the central figure in each of the drawings.

The old Bengal "pat" (पट) drawings upto the middle of the last century are so remarkable for their vigour and boldness of line and calligraphic quality and the excellence of the figure drawing that they will come as a revelation to all art-lovers. These old drawings, some of which can compare with the best examples of the other recognised schools, had unfortunately long gone out of fashion in the higher circles of Bengalee life accustomed to decorate their homes with inferior foreign pictures. It is the neglect of the 'cultured' that has brought about the ruin of art in Bengal. People now can hardly be made to believe that the "pats" of Kalighat could ever have had a glorious past. Once Mr. Ghose, while speaking eulogistically about these drawings, was abruptly

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interrupted by one of our venerable public men, who indignantly exclaimed : "What ! you mean art by those rubbish of Kalighat ?" Yet the early specimens of this school will come as a rude shock to such people and their name is legion who deny that there ever was any merit in these "pats". From the middle of the last century, the demand for the products of this school has come on a small and decreasing scale only from the masses. So decade after decade, the school has degenerated. The later drawings of stereotyped pictures of gods and goddesses and of social scenes lack the flexibility and firmness which characterise the work of the earlier artists. The Collection affords ample opportunity for comparing these two types of the Kalighat school. We may in passing remark with regret that those who have brought about the remarkable art revival in the Bengal of to-day do not appear to have sufficiently utilised, or, more properly, have not even recognised, the best products of this lost school. Were they ashamed to own these rustic artists as their foregoers in the art history of the country ?

Mr. Ghose by his indefatigable exertions has made a unique collection of the extremely rare early Bengal painted manuscript covers of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—a collection which is unique in point of the excellence of these art documents, and their large number and variety. These painted manuscript covers are unknown by reason of their rarity even to professed students of Indian art and are unrepresented in Museum collections. Mr. Ghose is engaged in a work on these "patas", so admirable for their beauty of colouring and "impeccable" drawing.

Paintings on playing cards were much liked by the aristocratic people of India and so they are now found scattered over many provinces. Very noteworthy are the rare playing cards on ivory in the Collection with exceedingly fine miniatures of animals in the early Mughal or Indo-Persian style of Mansur. Rectangular playing cards such as these are very rare. The specimens in the collection of the Dasavatar playing cards of Vishnupur are very old.

Thus far we have dealt only with the Indian section of the Collection. Mr. Ghose's artistic interest is not limited to India. He has a wide outlook on art history and is a keen student of the art of all nations. One who has seen the Collection will not need to be told that he is a lover of Chinese and Japanese art or that he has been attracted to Persian painting to which early Mughal art is so closely related. Besides many choice examples of Safavid painting, including signed specimens of Riza Abbasi and of his pupil Muin Mussavir, the Collection

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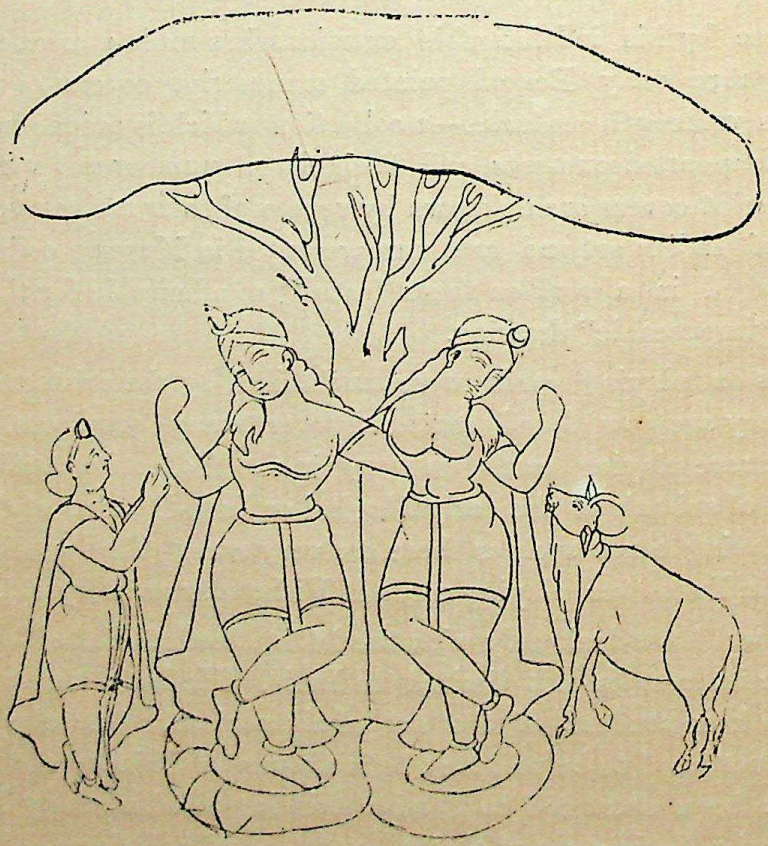
possesses several fine manuscripts with miniatures, one of the most notable of which is a fifteenth century, probably unpublished, manuscript with miniatures of the highest excellence of the Bihzad school.

We cannot be too thankful to Mr. Ghose for collecting and preserving these beautiful relics of a long-forgotten glorious past and all art-lovers should feel indebted to him, considering that no other art collection contains such a large number of select and representative specimens of all the various schools, whether Jain or Mughal, Rajput or Kangra, Pahari or Sikh, Bengalee, Orissan or South Indian, with their various sub-divisions. Indeed, this extensive Collection is not only a rich feast for pure artistic enjoyment, its representative character affords abundant materials for the study of practically the whole range of the history of old Indian painting, and the care and judgment and deep knowledge with which only select specimens have been included make it a collection to stimulate artistic taste and artistic creation.*



Old Bengal "Pat" Drawing.

*At the special request of Mr. Percy Brown, the Principal, Government School of Art, Calcutta, a loan exhibition consisting of representative specimens from this Collection is being held along with the Fine Art Exhibition.

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A miniature from a copy of the Kalpasutra Early Jain painting— 15th cent.

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Portrait of Riza Abbasi drawn by his pupil
Muin Musavir. (Safavid painting)

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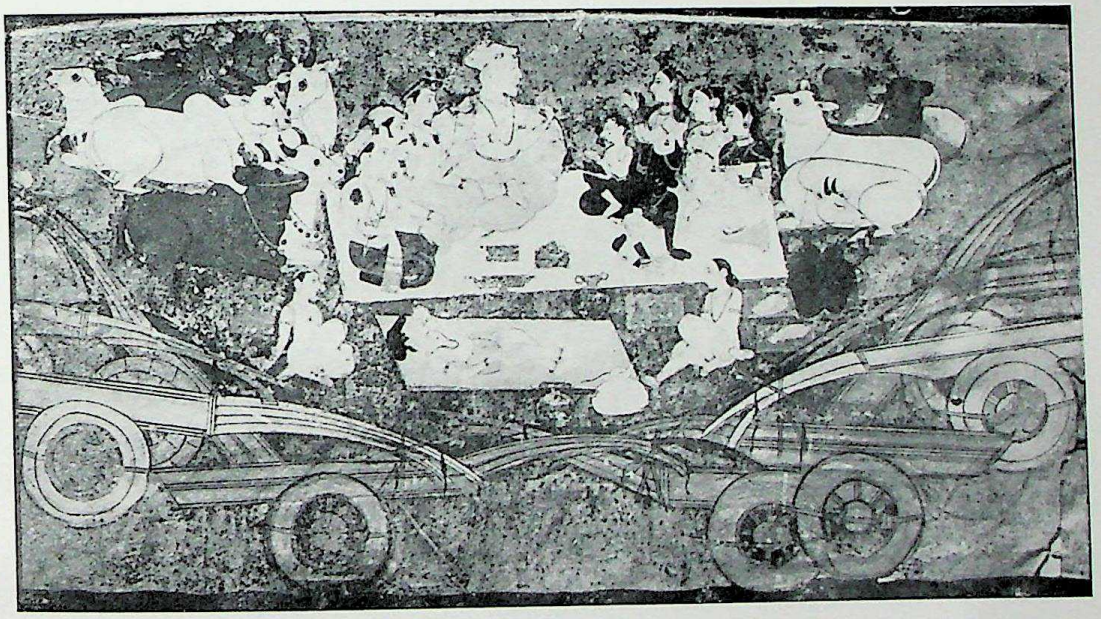

Journey to Mathura (Early Rajput Painting—Early 17th Cent.)

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Prince Danial and his wife, Jana Begum.
Contemporary Mughal Painting.

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Siege of Lanka—Old Pahari Painting (Beginning of the 17th cent.)

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Painted wood-cover of a manuscript (Bengal)

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